

Margaret Atwood, *The Penelopiad*. Edinburgh, New York and Melbourne: Canongate, 2005. Pp.XV+199. \$ 18.00. ISBN 1-84195-717-8.

"The trouble with poetry", says (former) poet laureate Billy Collins, "is that it encourages the writing of more poetry."

By this token, Homer is one of the greatest troublemakers, for his poems have encouraged probably more poetry writing, in more countries and languages, than anyone else's poems in the history of the Western world. And no wonder: Homer is awesome. He is phenomenal; he speaks to young and old alike. His words, whether in the original or in translation, in prose or in verse, keep inspiring ever new *kindly* thoughts, and eliciting new modes of expression suited to every day and age.

Of the two epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, it is the latter that seems to have a competitive edge when it comes to encouraging new writing. For instance, in *The Oxford Guide to Classical Mythology in the Arts* (From 1300 to 1990s) the listing of works inspired by the story of Achilles comprises about 14 pages; the comparable listing for Odysseus - 30 pages. The same ratio of about 1:2 in favor of *The Odyssey* can typically be found in any anthology of modern poetry on classical myth.

But it is not only the title character, Odysseus, that has such a grip on poets' imagination: his long-suffering wife, the prudent Penelope, has independently acquired quite a following among the modern poets. In an essay entitled "Penelope - the sequel: some uses of mythology in contemporary poetry" (*The Bread Loaf Anthology of Contemporary American Essays*, 1989), Linda Pastan quotes a number of modern poems based on the story of Penelope to explain and illustrate, first, her own long-standing fascination with Penelope, and also, in more general terms, the various approaches to myth taken by other modern poets. She speaks in particular of *interpretation* of, and *speculation* about myth, and cites as an example the case of Penelope's patience and fidelity. These features of Penelope's character have mostly been taken for granted over the centuries, although their psychological underpinnings have been variously interpreted by individual poets. On the other hand, there have also been periodic attempts to question Penelope's fidelity; those attempts, however, are mostly outside the domain of Homeric interpretation, and belong more in the field of speculation.

In her whimsical retelling Margaret Atwood has given us both an interpretation of *The Odyssey*, as well as quite a bit of speculation about the myth on which it was based. Incidentally, this is not the first time she has speculated about Penelope. In "Circe: Mud Poems" (*Selected Poems*, 1976), she already indicated that she did not trust Homer's portrayal of the prudent queen:

She's up to something, she's weaving  
Histories, they are never right,  
She has to do them over,  
She is weaving her version,  
The one you will believe in,  
The only one you will hear.

In the *Penelopiad* the story is narrated mainly by Penelope herself. "Now that I am dead I know everything": these are the opening words spoken by a Penelope strolling in an amused and detached way through the Meadows of Asphodel. However, hers is not the only story we hear. There are also the twelve maids, the ones whose terrible death cannot fail to shock every first-time reader of *The Odyssey*. With the rope still dangling from their necks, they are ready and eager to have their version of the story heard too. The two competing, and, needless to say, contradictory accounts of the events having taken place in Ithaca in the absence of Odysseus, strive to shed some light on the "two questions that must pose themselves after any close reading of *The Odyssey*: what led to the hanging of the maids, and what was Penelope really up to" (p. XV).

The questions are perceptive, no doubt, but it is not so much any new insights or answers, as the literary form itself that gives originality and freshness to this book. The prose narration done by Penelope alternates with *choral songs* by the chorus of the maids. Each one of the choral songs is in a different mood, tone and meter, and is graced by a distinctive title. The titles, as the songs themselves, are ingenious, funny and irreverent: A Rope Jumping Rhyme; Kiddie Mourn, A Lament by the Maids; If I Was a Princess, A Popular Tune; The Birth of Telemachus, An Idyll; The Wily Sea Captain, A Sea Shanty; Dreamboats, A Ballad; The Perils of Penelope, A Drama; An Anthropology Lecture; The Trial of Odysseus as Videotaped by the Maids; We Are Walking Behind You, A Love Song; Envoi.

In an explanatory note at the end of the book Margaret Atwood says that "the Chorus of Maids is a tribute to the use of such choruses in Greek drama. The convention of burlesquing the main action was present in the satyr plays performed before serious dramas" (p.198). However, although she quotes the Greek drama as her inspiration, what Margaret Atwood has actually produced here is a perfect example of another ancient literary genre - the Menippean satire. The mixture of prose and poetry, the reworking of a venerable classic in a tone of playful irony, the constant hinting at the seedy and the lascivious that might be lurking behind the façade of decency and propriety - all belong to the genre that we know from the extant works of Seneca, Petronius, et al. It just may be the case that this form is a natural fit for all kinds of literary spoofs, across the cultures and centuries.

Penelope's narrative, done entirely in prose, falls into two parts: the first, shorter, dealing with her childhood in Sparta and the marriage to Odysseus, and the second based more closely on the events from *The Odyssey*. The ancient sources for the early life of Penelope being few and not very informative, Margaret Atwood relies mostly on her own imagination here - a dangerous proposition even for a most talented and conscientious poet. For how can one begin to imagine a personal life in a historical period of whose realities so little is known?! One may proceed by way of general anthropological comparisons and deductions, but the results are bound to be disappointing. This is why, in my opinion, the first half of Penelope's narrative comes across as somewhat contrived and ironically detached. Also, some of the general pronouncements are simply unconvincing; for instance, the way the maids are first introduced strikes me as being somehow more in tune with Charles Dickens's England than with Homer's Mycenaean Greece. But then, again, what exactly do we know about the lives of maids in the courts of Mycenaean Greece?

After some initial floundering, however, once she reaches the familiar ground of the Homeric material, Penelope gets back on track and relaxes into some really fine story-telling. The growing tension between her calm and self-assured tone and the raucous comments and revelations by the chorus leads to a mystery-like ending where no questions have been clearly answered, but one fact emerges beyond any doubt: the maids have been terribly wronged, and there is nothing in this world that can make that wrong right.

And although I might be critical of some minor elements in the story, I acknowledge that Margaret Atwood has made an eminently valid point: the maids have been totally overlooked by countless poets who had so far found inspiration in *The Odyssey*. It is the triad Odysseus/Penelope/Telemachus that usually attracts most attention; even Odysseus's decrepit old dog Argus is known to have received an occasional poetic tribute -- but *the maids*?! I, for one, have not yet come across a poem in memory of the lowly maids sacrificed, like the twelve young Trojans in *The Iliad*, for the sake of some savage ancient ritual. Therefore, I give Margaret Atwood full credit for her mischievous but thoughtful reading of *The Odyssey*, and I am convinced that *The Penelopiad* will be much enjoyed by every classicist as well as by any true lover of Homer's epic.

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